

# The Miami Herald

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 1995

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## Dressing up Metrorail and giving it someplace to go

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It is sometimes described as the train to nowhere. Metrorail stations, critics like to note, generally fail to leave passengers at the front door of anything. Leave the train and there you are at... a parking lot. Or the side of a highway.

Not for long.

Developers break ground today on an immense and unprecedented complex of discount stores connected to the Dadeland North Metrorail station, kicking off a revived county campaign to transform transit stops into attractions.

Next month, the county will accept proposals from developers seeking to build a complex at the First Street Metromover stop. Going up for grabs within a year is the country property surrounding stations at Allapattah, Douglas Road and South Miami. After those, the Coconut Grove station.

Building the stations first and then creating reasons to stop there might seem a little like bringing the mountain to Mohammed, but county transit planners see two benefits:

First, the county will make millions by leasing the properties. The Dadeland North project, which includes a Sports Authority and a Target, guarantees \$400,000 annually. But with revenue-sharing provisions in the lease, county administrators figure on adding about \$1 million annually to Dade County coffers. Eventually the site will include a 305-room hotel and office building.

Second, the projects probably will boost Metro-Rail ridership. Estimates by the county predict an extra 200,000 boardings to and from the Dadeland North Station.

"This project is about creating places that people will take transit to get to," said Gregory Jones, a Metro-Dade county consultant who has worked on similar projects in Phoenix, Denver and Portland.

Just what will get built at each stop depends on what developers propose. The county is simply seeking projects that will replenish county finances and lure train riders.

"We don't think we are the experts in real estate development," said Frank Talleda of Metro-Dade Transit. "We don't go out and tell developers what to build and where. We say, 'Here's the site' and ask them what the free market wants there."

### Building up, not out

Transit planners hope to draw a variety of proposals for each location. The competition for the Dadeland North site, however, drew only one proposal. But that was back in 1982 -- the project since has been delayed and almost killed during negotiations. Today, planners believe, traffic congestion and the land squeeze will make the open sites around stations more attractive.

Indeed, the force of crowding can be seen in the design of the complex at the North Dadeland station, which is scheduled to open next fall and is being developed by Berkowitz Development Group. The complex literally stacks up cavernous discount stores that are typically arrayed individually in parking lots: Target, Sports Authority, Best Buy, Bed Bath & Beyond and a crafts store called Michaels.

In the typical configuration, these projects would sprawl over 35 acres. The site at Dadeland North is a fifth that size. The building's bulk is stretched upward -- not outward.

"These retailers are realizing that they are running out of these huge suburban sites," said Robin Bosco, the architect of the complex. "You do what's cheap and easy until there's no more cheap and easy to do. This is an opportunity to step into the next era of development -- going vertical."

### High-tech parking

That means a parking garage rather than a parking lot. It means the Sports Authority is built above the Target is built above the Best Buy.

All those levels pose problems for shoppers: How do you make it easy to push a shopping cart through a parking garage? How do you make it easy for customers to navigate from the six-level garage into the three-level retail behemoth?

Complicating matters even more, the Dadeland North project must cater to both train and car passengers. Only about 2,000 passengers a day get off at Dadeland North -- not nearly enough to sustain a center of this size.

The crux of the solution involves a high-tech parking garage. When cars enter, a computer bulletin board tells drivers which parking levels connect to which stores, as well as which levels have parking available.

Drivers choose a level and ascend on a spiral

ramp, exiting at the appropriate floor. The floors are flat, so departing customers don't have to manage carts up or down inclines. For security and atmosphere, the lights inside will be 30 times brighter than county codes require.

### Open spaces

To get to the stores from the parking, customers will walk across bridges extending from the garage, over a galleria space, and onto one of the terraces in front of each store.

"The whole idea of the galleria is orientation," Bosco said. You see what store you are approaching, rather than exiting a parking deck and popping into a store unknown until you get inside.

Oversized elevators, about eight feet by 15 feet and big enough for carts, connect the floors. The elevators and shafts are made of glass so customers can keep their bearings through the immense space.

A covered walkway about 200 feet long will usher train passengers across a plaza to the stores. Unlike the Dadeland South station, where the office buildings and hotel fail to welcome riders, Bosco has set up the stores for railside prominence. Among other things, an immense sculpture -- possibly as tall as 50 feet -- by noted artist Romero Britto will welcome transit riders.

"We felt they were critical to the project," Bosco said. "Riders on the train will be able to see the walkways, the plaza, the stores. It's a whole different animal."

